

Food and fitness

By Emma Wheeler



The growing focus on food-as-medicine is driving a large change within the agri-food industry.

Having the ability to grow New Zealand fresh produce that align with consumers expectations in the area of health and wellness is increasingly becoming very sought after. Consumers are striving for healthier lifestyles, in which food has a large role to play. Not only food, but the quality and nutritional density of the food is coming into question more. This global trend has meant a shift away from commodity models, and shifted towards specialised food with specific nutritional profiles, and New Zealand's horticulture industry is in a good position to leverage this.

As New Zealand consumers become more educated on the impact that food has on their health and wellness, they are shaping a food evolution. There is a strong link between individuals increasing their intake of fruit and vegetables to improved health and wellness outcomes. As the health and wellness of our people and communities increases, this creates an environment for our nation to thrive. Ensuring our people have access to high quality food should be a key priority, and educating families and youth on the role of food and the way in which food choices impact health and the environment is a foundation to start.

It is worth noting that governments are awakening to the power of preventative healthcare systems, with food being a staple to the solution. As we start to develop robust frameworks to address this, food will further become a tool our doctors can reach to in their toolkit to educate patients. Having the ability to increase the overlap of food and healthcare, will allow a pivot away from curative to preventative healthcare systems. In turn this will enable a redirection of money towards target areas of food education and access to the right food.

It is recommended through The Ministry of Health that adults consume at least three servings of vegetables and two of fruit each day. Consumers are likely to look to natural foods that enhance health, are convenient and

have value add attributes. Fruit and vegetables have significant growth potential to tick the box of these characteristics. Food is identified as instrumental as part of an integrated approach to healthcare, with nutrient dense fruits and vegetables underpinning gravitation towards an increasing plant-based movement. Historically, we have had animal protein dominated diets but recommendations are strongly being emphasized that we should increase plant consumption, and decrease animal product consumption. There is an abundance of research surfacing that has been done to show this doesn't just facilitate human health, but it also increases the health of the planet.

With this large opportunity to optimise human health, there is the challenge to ensure our environment is not negatively impacted negatively, but quite the opposite in that we are finding solutions to make sure it is regenerated and left in better condition that it is found. Regenerative and organic farming practices that focus on soil health are gaining popularity and traction as one option to assist with the health of the planet.

Nutritional quality is a challenge for farmers. Ensuring soil health is critical, so the farming practices that are adopted play a key role in the quality of our produce. These regenerative practices on land will generate not only better environmental outcomes, but more nutritionally dense product from better soil health. Regenerative agriculture is not about planting billions of trees or taking productive land out of production. Rather it is about farming in a way that enhances biodiversity, enriches soils, improves the cleanliness and quality of waterways and streams, and strengthens ecosystems.

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